

The Cremation of the Most Venerable Madihe Paññāsīha Mahānāyaka Thera

Venerable Dhammavihari Thera

Most venerable members of the Mahāsaṅgha, distinguished religious dignitaries, most eminent members of the State and members of the Opposition, members of the Diplomatic Corps, ladies and gentlemen.

We have come here today to cremate the mortal remains of our late Mahānāyaka Thera, not to praise him. But a few relevant remarks have to be made where necessary.

I feel greatly honored to be invited to address a few words to you in English as a tribute to the late Mahānāyaka Thera. I am deeply grieved on this occasion at his passing away for more reasons than one. He is eight years my senior and I have known him for more than seventy years of my life. In 1990, when at the age of seventy, I sought ordination under him as a monk, I had the good luck to have him appointed as my Upajjhāya or Senior Tutor.

In my younger days in the early forties, both as a student at the University and as a teacher at the University thereafter, I have very closely known the Mahānāyaka Thera's impeccable religiousness and his very deep sense of national consciousness. This was naturally the product of his upbringing and equally naturally the outcome of the wholesome environment in which he had the good fortune to grow up. It is also true to say that he rose much above the expectations of his erudite teacher, the very renowned Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa Mahanāyaka Thera who had by then built the well-sought-after edifice of the day, Vajirārāmaya at Bambalapitiya. As a young student at the then known University College, I did myself benefit a great deal through my close associations with this

great savant Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa Mahānāyaka Thera.

We need no historians, from within the universities or outside, to tell us that some of the well-groomed statesmen of the day like Dudley Senanayake, J. R. Jayewardene, S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake, no matter to whatever degree they perfected themselves in the process, grew to stature under the tutelage of that great mentor, Pelene Siri Vajirañāṇa. They do not appear to have learned everything they needed from there. But these great men of the day, we recollect with great lament as we look around today, always felt they had something more to learn from such sources of religious inspiration than what they already knew.

To the Paññāsīha Mahānāyaka Thera, Buddhism was well and truly the national and cultural heritage of Sri Lanka which she had inherited from her good neighbour, North India. Buddhism had immensely enriched nearly the whole of Asia more than two thousand years ago, including Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq in the west, the whole of Mongolia in the north, China, Korea and Japan in the Far East and many regions of South Asia, to name only a few.

I respect the Mahānāyaka Thera very highly as a thorough student of the history of this area of non-Sri Lankan Buddhism. It did and does exist in the world, even today. Let students of history of religions and also of sociology know this sufficiently well, before they embark on their researches in these areas. The Mahānāyaka Thera has had more than Professorial standing in the subject, I assure you. As for related statistics on the subject, very few, even of astute politicians could have deceived him. It is highly lamentable that the structured sterility in the field of education today in Sri Lanka cannot produce even a patch on the likeness of the Mahānāyaka Thera.

It has been a national tragedy, caused often by ill informed political theorists, that the Mahānāyaka Thera has been branded a racist. The greater tragedy in his own life had been that he has often had to step in to play the role of the indispensable **Defender of the Faith for Buddhism** when the current rulers of Sri

Lanka failed, time and again, to possess the necessary vim and vigour for that task. It is indeed a stupid usage of the neo-social-scientists to brandish the scandalous word Chauvinism in association with him, more fitting elsewhere in other different ethno-religious contexts in the world than here. We forgive them, for they know not what they do, not even what they say.

But his genuine interest in the social and cultural well being of the people of this land, irrespective of caste, creed or religion, is evident in many areas of his life activities. As a serious student of Buddhism, he firmly believed in the dictum as laid down in Buddhism that alcohol, served to humans as an accompaniment to social elitism in five star hotels in the city or even at the village wedding houses, or served to gods with religious sanctions as a religious ritual to win special favours from them, were equally despicable and equally degrading. From very early years of his life, he joined one of the country's foremost temperance workers, namely the Most Venerable Kalukondayāve Paññāsekera Nāyaka Thera.

In more recent years, I do remember going with him to the Mahaveli Development zones like the Dehi Atta Kandiya and visiting individual homes and advising village farmers not to wastefully spend their hard earned money on the very high class brands of popular alcohol which are being continually produced locally and generously supplied on a weekly basis by the ingenious metropolitan business tycoons. In doing this continuously all his life, whose cause did he serve? Anything ethnic or communal or anything denominational?

Even in these urgently needed reformist moves, government after government, the Mahānāyaka Thera was extremely gentle, far too gentle one would hastily say, even to a point of erring in the eyes of many veteran social scientists. Undeniably, that was his right. We must necessarily bow down before him and leave it at that. We guess that it was due to this inborn gentleness of his that he never wished to push his reforms to any convincing triumphant end. I have sat with him on many occasions when he silently accepted the defence

positions put forward by eminent state personalities on many vital state issues, knowing fully well the lack of honesty within them and the evils of their defences.

Fortunately or otherwise, being a monk so full of self-awareness and religious sensitivity from his very young days, he never exhibited the force and the active firmness which a meaningful opposition needs to possess for the purpose of good governance. This directly implies, as we think in our own Buddhist terms, non-employment of force [or *a + vyāpāda*] which immediately shuts out violence or [*a + vihiṃsā*]. This also adequately clarifies why the Mahānāyaka Thera did not choose, as a Buddhist monk, to take directly to active politics.

Besides, he would have well and truly known the unmistakable position assigned to the true and self-developing Buddhist monk within our religious frame work, for the correction and guidance of erring rulers. It occurs in the Dīgha Nikāya in the Cakkavattisīhanāda Suttanta [DN. III. P. 61]. Both among rulers and the ruled, the monks and the laymen, those who have not set their eyes on it yet, do need to read it. This current need in the world today to blend a little bit of religious thinking into the machinery of statecraft is witnessed in the production of a book like Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft by the Oxford University Press in 1994. This is the crying need of sensible good government in the world today.

Establish justice, i.e. acceptable good behaviour in terms of law and order in the land. This is the first requirement: *mā te tāta vijite adhammakāro pavattittha* say our Buddhist texts. Neither the rulers nor the ruled shall be perpetrators of crime in the land. As for the guidance of the state in this direction, the rulers are called upon to recognize the cultural propensity of the land. This is where the demographic pattern seriously matters. The political leaders are required to go to the religious men of depth and honest understanding of their religiousness, not mere hereditary title-holders. These religious men themselves must be bent on self reform [*ekam attānaṃ damenti ekam attānaṃ samenti...*]. Thereupon the

rulers must do as the religious men bid them to do. In Sri Lanka today, neither the Universities nor Monastic Institutions of Higher Learning ever teach or talk about these areas of study. Not even the Graduate Schools which are rapidly increasing.

We are proud that our Mahānāyaka Thera endeavoured to highlight some of these lesser known areas which benefit mankind, without any ethno-religious loyalties or partialities. He sat patiently all the time, blazing a trail, like patience on a monument. Let not his vision ever turn backward. Let him discern his own desired goal of Nibbāna in the horizon and courageously journey forward.

Let us now honour him posthumously with the title the **Lord of Loving Kindness** or **Maitreya Nātha** of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Roaring your Lion's Roar of Wisdom, O hero,
May you soon reach your blissful goal of Nibbāna.

Bahunnaṃ vata atthāya bhagini me janayi' maṃ sutam
Abhikkama mahāpañña + sīho ' va padam accutam.

[Composed by Dhammavihari]

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Some Moral Instructions from the Sayings of the Mahānāyaka Thera

Venerable Professor Dhammavihari

1. "Correct the behaviour of the individual and guide his life. Thereafter the rest of the society shall fall in line". Here is a very brief commentary of mine to the late Mahānāyaka Thera's simple dictum in Sinhala: *Minihā hadā raṭa hadamu. Minihā* is any homo sapiens, i.e. a human being - man, woman or child. Where do these persons need to be corrected. It is in terms of their behavior which consists of thought, word and deed. Correctness or goodness of it is labeled as moral goodness or *sīla*, i.e. healthy inter personal relationships.

This instruction, whether, in Sinhala or English is too precious to remain printed on paper or painted on cloth and to be used occasionally as banners across the roads These instructions need to be planted on the rich good soil of one's own family life, ensuring its successful germination. And where could one find better farmers to attend to this process than in a civilized cultured home of any denominational origin? Thus do not fail to remember that those golden words of the Mahānāyaka Thera is an individual philosophy for every one of us responsible people, with a collectivist ideology. Look forward to its fruitful propagation and contribute whole-heartedly.

*Please note that these remarks are relevant in the application of the specific instructions from the Dhamma such as *Brahmā 'ti mātāpitāro pubbācariyā ' ti vuccare* etc. given to us by our late Mahānāyaka Thera.

2. Another great lesson we learn from the life of the Mahānāyaka Thera is the great honor in which he held the *Ratanattaya* or the triple gem. Nobody's life can be a rich enough Buddhist life, divorced from this. Proliferation of Buddhist texts on the publisher's conveyor belt today does not indicate by any means an improvement in the quality or quantity of Buddhist learning in this country.

The installation even of a small-sized Buddha in one's home, to be equally well honored by every member of the family, the father, mother and the children, was a must in the Mahānāyaka Thera's regular instruction to the Buddhists. We join him whole-heartedly in this and go even much further with him and insist that

there should also be the installation of the Buddha in one's own heart, [not merely within a glass cabinet] even if this involves a little bit of open heart surgery. This gives one an awareness of honoring the Buddha well and truly, by way of one's honest religious alignment, even without regularized material offerings of food and drink to him: *Dhammānudhamma-paṭipattiyā Buddhaṃ pūjemi*.

Delay not a day more in carrying out these instructions to bring back seriously the Buddha into your own life.

*Please note that it is important to understand what the late Madihe Paññāsīha Mahānāyaka Thera has uttered through his life by way of *dhamma desanā*, both with regard to its literal meaning or *attha* and its spirit or *dhamma* [*attha-paṭisamvedī* and *dhammaa-paṭisamvedī*]. They carry a double emphasis.